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ABSTRACT

Three processes form the basis for interactive teaching--a model recommending that teachers guide students in thinking before reading, interacting with the text, and reflecting and reacting to the text materials. Successful reading often depends upon the ability of students to relate what they already know to what they are about to read. Questions, both teacher and student constructed, encourage students to associate their experiences and prior knowledge with the text content. Semantic mapping is another technique for expanding and relating prior knowledge. As for interacting with the text, a study-reading strategy, PARS, has proven to be appropriate for middle grade and junior high school students. PARS consists of four steps: (1) setting a purpose, (2) asking questions that relate to the purpose, (3) reading to answer these questions, and (4) summarizing content in one's own words. Questions that can be categorized as requiring application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation of content are profitably used during the final phase, when the reader is reflecting and reacting to the text material. One final reflective-reactive strategy middle grade students may enjoy using to integrate their new knowledge is the cinquain, which encourages readers to weave together new concepts with feelings they experienced during their reading. (HOD)

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COMPREHENSION OF EXPOSITORY TEXTS IN MIDDLE GRADE CLASSROOMS

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Introduction

How often have you had children with good records in reading in the primary grades fall behind when confronted with reading and understanding middle grades textbooks? This is not surprising when one realizes that content area study involves understanding material with a vast number of complex concepts. Expository reading varies from the use of basal readers where most stories are narrative in style. Often students don't naturally make the transition from reading narrative to reading expository materials and, just as frequently, teachers have not been prepared to help students bridge this gap. In this presentation we will share strategies which classroom teachers may use in helping students have success in content area reading.

The renowned reading authority, Olive Niles (1978), identified three major characteristics which she believed were typical of a good teacher. Included were the practice of making full use of previous understandings, reading with a definite purpose in mind, and looking for various kinds of thought relationships. These three processes form the basis for Interactive Teaching, a model which recommends that teachers guide students in:

thinking before reading,
interacting with the text, and
reflecting and reacting to the text materials.

Traditionally, teachers have tended to focus their attention on the second stage, instructing students to interact with the text, without engaging in the essential process of thinking of all the prior learnings that may influence the comprehension of what is being read.

Thinking before Reading

Successful reading often depends upon the ability of students to relate what they already know to what they are about to read. Teachers need a quick, non-threatening way of obtaining a feel for what students know about a topic. Langer (1982) has proposed a procedure known as PREP. Here the teacher reviews the text and selects a word, phrase, or picture that will lead to class discussion of a concept in the text. Students are encouraged to respond with whatever concept comes to mind and responses are recorded. As students respond the teacher probes for why students made certain responses. This process is less threatening than paper-and-pencil pretests and has the added advantage of allowing students to hear the ideas of others. This exchange of information allows students to expand concepts and to probe their own thinking skills.

Questions, both teacher and student constructed, encourage learners to associate their experiences and prior knowledge with the text content. In a unit on the American Revolution, the authors used pictures, books, and antiques as starting points for questioning.

Semantic mapping, another technique for expanding and relating prior knowledge, may follow the use of questioning PREP. In this comprehension strategy students link concepts through the use of diagrams. Relating again to the American Revolution, students may be asked what they know of the word congress. As students respond, their concepts in the form of words will be mapped with connecting lines indicating the relationships of concepts. This technique presents the student with the opportunity to listen to others, and thus through oral discussion the

student's concepts are expanded. For more specific guidance on semantic mapping see Pearson and Johnson (1978).

Children are more able to relate to the narrative stories which adults often read to them during their early years. But, seldom do we attempt to read expository materials and discuss their structures with young children. Yet it is through the expository text that much of the learning in the classroom takes place. Teachers should be aware of the student's need to explore the structure of the text with which he is working. Class time should be devoted to discussing how chapters in texts are formulated, how important concepts are highlighted, how new vocabulary is presented, how the text has many more concepts to be learned than in library books. Teachers must begin to help students develop a set for what is involved in subject matter texts.

Interacting with the Text

For several decades the SQ3R technique, which stands for survey question, read, relate, and review, has been used by mature readers to facilitate their study of texts. However Estes and Vaughn (1978) describe a study-reading strategy, PARS, which prove more appropriate for middle grade and junior high school learners. PARS consists of four essential steps:

setting a purpose,
asking questions relates to the purpose,
reading to answer these questions, and
summarizing content in one's own words.

Each component of PARS requires the reader to think and to be actively involved in the entire reading-study process. Consequently, the reader

is more likely to demand meaning from reading and to recall the content when searching for an answer.

Both the purpose and questions can be generated by transposing major headings and subtitles. The title "Important Events of the American Revolution" provides the reader with the obvious purpose of reading in order to identify some of the important events in the American Revolution. Likewise, the subtitle, "the Battle of Bunker Hill", in question form might query, "What was the significance of the battle of Bunker Hill?" After the reader formulates the needed questions and begins reading a subsection of the text, he naturally moves from thinking before reading to interacting with the text.

Teachers, too, may choose to pose questions during the initial study period to guide students in grasping the basic factual data presented. "Where was the First Continental Congress held?" "Who were the Minutemen?" "What does surrender mean?" Teacher questions that force students to translate and interpret the author's meaning of data also prompt thinking of the lower or foundation levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. For example, "What does it mean for one general 'to hand over' his sword to another?" if not explained in the text, would require the reader to read between the lines and infer its logical meaning.

Reflecting and Reacting to the Text

Beyond this point in Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Cognitive Domain, questions that can be categorized as requiring application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation of content are more profitably used during the final phase when the reader is reflecting and reacting

to the text material. It is unlikely that the reader will be prepared to engage in these more complex types of thinking until the content has been thoroughly learned and understood. Examples of questions on the American Revoluation that require complex reflective-interactive thinking may include:

Application "Based on the actions taken by the colonists in setting up their new government, list three major things the Africans in the Belgium Congo had to do to establish their new nation, Zaire."

Analysis "Why was France an invaluable aid to the American colonists in winning the Revolutionary War? Compare the value of French and Spanish aid to the colonies."

Synthesis "Write two pages that might have been found in the diary of General Cornwallis just before his surrender."

Evaluation "How important were the roles played by Paul Revere, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson in creating the new nation? Justify your response."

Certainly questions from each of the six levels in the hierarchy would not be utilized in every lesson. Still, Bloom's Taxonomy serves as a helpful reminder that mastery of expository writing often necessitates both reflecting on and reacting to the content through a variety of complex thinking skills.

In preference to the typical time line, visually oriented students may find help in recalling some of the major events of the American Revolution in sequential order through the use of guided imagery. "Shut your eyes and try to imagine a pictorial symbol to represent the Battle

of Bunker Hill, the Declaration of Independence, and the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown. Through this means some students may discover an invaluable tool to strengthen recall and reflection on text content.

Teachers may practice the technique of reading aloud paragraphs and having students listen as they, the teachers, think their way through the content of the paragraphs. Since thinking is a covert activity we need a technique which will allow us to demonstrate how we grasp meaning as we read. Reading short segments of texts and then orally going step by step through the processes we used to comprehend, will help some students to grasp the processes they should use in comprehending. Students should learn to monitor their reading. Questions which help in this process include:

> How does the author present information?
>
> Does the author use a temporal, cause/effect, comparison/contrast pattern to organize the information?
>
> Am I able to determine which facts are significant and which ones are less significant?
>
> Can I eliminate insignificant materials?
>
> Can I relate a series of facts into a whole?

One final reflective-reactive strategy middle graders may enjoy using to integrate their new knowledge is the cinquain. Estes and Vaughn (1978) propose that teachers encourage readers to weave together new concepts with feelings they experienced during their reading and discussion of a topic. Once the elements are identified, most middle graders can easily follow a model of a cinquain and experience satisfaction from creating a meaningful poem.

By definition, the first line of a cinquain is a one word title. The second line is a two word description of the topic. Three words expressing action of the topic constitute line three. Then, follows a four word phrase showing feeling for the topic. The final line is a one word synonym that restates the essence of the topic. Applying this model to essential concepts and feelings surrounding the American Revolution a cinquain might read:

Colonists
Unfairly governed
Appealing, fighting, dying
Committed men defeat British
Independence.

Conclusion

By providing middle and junior high school readers with the interactive teaching model and by guiding them to; think before they read their text, actively interact with the author to answer student and teacher generated questions, and reflect on and react to the new concepts presented by the author, teachers can help students successfuily bridge the gap between narrative and expository reading.

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